DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 110 197 PS 007 993

AUTHOR Clark, Vernon L.
TITLE What Are the Essential Characteristics of the Effective Early Education Programs?
INSTITUTION North Carolina Univ., Chapel Hill. Frank Porter Graham Center.
PUB DATE May 75
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Spring Research Conference of the North Carolina Association of Research in Education (Reidsville, North Carolina, May 16-17, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Documentation; *Early Childhood Education; Objectives; Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Preschool Programs; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; *Program Evaluation; *Program Improvement; *Program Planning; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

This article identifies and describes 10 program characteristics considered to be essential for an effective early childhood program. These characteristics include: (1) target specification; (2) procedures for addressing assessed and experientially perceived needs of children and other target groups; (3) realistic goals with measurable outcome objectives; (4) activities and events to operationalize defined objectives; (5) periodic evaluation for program improvement; (6) supportive services; (7) parents as participants, partners, and controllers; (8) maintaining continual contact with children; (9) belief in the child's ability to learn and the program's responsibility to address his needs, and (10) reliable and valid documentation of program operations. (JMB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED101197

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EFFECTIVE EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Vernon L. Clark, Ph.D.

Technical Assistance Development System
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center
University of North Carolina

*Presented at the Spring Research Conference of the North Carolina Association of Research in Education (NCARE), Reidsville, North Carolina, May 16-17, 1975.

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EFFECTIVE EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM?

Vernon Lee Clark, Ph.D.
Technical Assistance Development System

Has the field of early childhood education progressed to the point where essential characteristics of effective programs can be identified, described, and replicated? This question is related to the larger issue of how should we proceed toward improving the older early education programs and the conceptualization and planning of newer and yet to be developed early education programs. This paper takes the position that the field is mature enough to permit the drawing of some basic, though tentative, conclusions regarding early education programs, and proposes to address the issues of identifying and describing the essential characteristics of an effective program in early childhood education.

With the interest and fervor about early childhood education just as great now as it has ever been, it is imperative that those who are interested in the conceptualization, planning, and improvement of early education programs attempt to address these two very fundamental issues. The responses to these issues can be decisive in the success of early childhood programs regardless of the social, geographical, and economic environment.

Most efforts aimed at describing the essentials of program development in early education, treat the administrative or management-mechanistic aspects, such as required dimensions of physical facilities, meeting health and safety specifications, financing and fee scheduling. Although these regulations and guidelines do have their importance, there are other somewhat more intangible programmatic considerations of equal or greater concern. From a perusal of the literature and practical involvement, in a variety of roles, with early education programs within (1) the BEH Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped, Handicapped Children's Early Education Program Network, (2) the Office of Child Development's National HeadStart program, and contact with (3) various private and public preschool efforts, the author has had the opportunity to identify and observe certain specific characteristics pertinent to effective early education programs. Following is an identification and description of these essential characteristics. There is no real attempt to prioritize these characteristics; because of their nature and function a natural type of ordering is possible.

*T.A.D.S., 500 NCNB PLAZA, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 27514

Target specification. One high priority characteristic is the identification of those on whom the program intends to have an impact. This is the process of target specification. When a program has specified its target population(s) it has answered the questions: "For whom are we planning and conducting this early education program?" "What needs can or will this program address?" "What group of children need services but for some reason are not receiving them?" In early education programs, the target groups are usually children, parents of enrolled children, and decision-makers. Decision-makers is a category for agencies, persons, organizations, etc., external to the program but capable or enhancing the quality of the program, and on whom the program can have a qualitative impact. Examples of decision-makers are local Kiwanis clubs, state departments of education, and regional and national agencies and associations. In specifying target groups, the description may be (1) categorical and generally descriptive or (2) sub-categorical, very exclusive and limiting. In either case, target specification must not create vagueness and ambiguities as toward whom the program is directed, and about the need the program is addressing. The following characterization gives examples of the two descriptive categories.

Specifying Your Target Population

Categorical	Sub-categorical
-preschool children 3-5 yrs.	-Preschool children, 3-5 yrs. who've physical handicaps (or mental handicaps; of working parents, etc.)
-parents of enrolled children	-parents of enrolled children who've expressed an inability to relate to their children
-funding agencies supporting programs for young children	-funding agencies within N.C. supporting private programs for 2-3 year-olds who've working parents
-staff of the surrounding public schools receiving children from the program	-public school personnel recommended for orientation to and training in the identification and treatment of handicapped children
-local elected municipal officials	-locally elected municipal officials who've not yet visited the program

In appropriate situations the program may want to complement its description of the targets with an on-file list of names. Ideally, the task of target specification involves: (1) identifying and describing a group needing but not receiving services (2) specifying the resources available and accessible to address the identified needs of that group (3) matching resources with applicable needs (4) describing those who still have unmet needs: this is obtained from the discrepancy between those needs being met and those needs not being met by the specified resources (or the present structure for service delivery).

A Procedure for Addressing Assessed and Experientially Perceived Needs of Children and Other Target Groups. Although there is a very wide range of curricula approaches, i.e., behavioral modification, academic preschool and programmatic philosophies, i.e. child-centered, parent-centered, espoused by effective programs, most programs have employed a similar format in the development of its curriculum for children and parents and its program of activities for other target groups. The general procedure used is (1) assessment of the target's present state, condition, or strengths and weaknesses across various indices (2) a descriptive statement of the program's goals and detailed objectives for each target group: these goals and objectives reflect program philosophy, assessment information and qualities and resources of the target useful to the program in its purposes (3) an analysis and sequential ordering of the tasks and objectives to be mastered (4) the development, implementation, and conduct of those activities designed to accomplish the objectives, and (5) re-assessment and evaluation. This procedure can be applicable to any programmatic philosophy.

A primary step in the conceptualization and planning of the program's structure and curriculum is to define for itself what Evans (1971) calls "the issues of what, when, how, who and where". The issue of what concerns the content matter of the program; the issue of when relates to timing -- the sequential presentation and management of experiences appropriate to the developmental process; the issue of how relates to the interaction methodology to be used with the various target groups; the issue of who deals with identifying and describing personnel needed to conduct the program and interact with the targets; the issue of where refers to the physical setting(s) for operating the program: such as a home-based program, center-based, or a combination of the two.

Realistic Goals with Measurable Outcome Objectives. The effective program is characterized by clearly perceived and documented needs addressed by coherent goals and concrete, clear objectives focussing on and leading to measurable outcome behaviors from the identified target group members. Appropriately conceptualized and stated goals and objectives improve the 'governability' of the program. A program is successful to the extent that its administrative, instructional, and, to an extent, clerical staffs have a congruent interpretation of the program's philosophy, goals and objectives. In large measure, the vitality of the strength and substance of a program is grounded in its singleness of purpose and informed thrust of effort. Comprehendible goals and objectives that permit measurability and precise interpretation contribute greatly to this purpose.

After the early education staff has identified its target group(s) and their needs, the program states its action plan. The action plan is the program's goals and objectives. By definition (Gallagher, Surles, Hayes, 1973) a goal is a general statement revealing assumptions made about expected outcomes of an organized program. Programmatic goals should be few in

number and should identify a need area(s) [i.e., perceptual development, social-emotional development, improving parent participation, increasing parents' knowledge of child growth and development], its target(s), purpose, expected results, and expected completion date. Objectives are statements written in measurable terms which describe the results of planned activities and events. Though not always explicitly stated, the effective programs usually have at least two kinds of objectives: administrative objectives and program outcome objectives. Administrative objectives relate to the establishment, organization and maintenance of the human and technological systems in the program. Examples of administrative objectives would be -- to hire staff, to implement community recommendations for program improvement, to identify at least five sites for field visits. Program Outcome Objectives refer to the specific behaviors, the program intends to influence, improve, or extinguish in the target. Each outcome objective identifies the behavior to be affected by the program's resources.

In developing goals and objectives, it may be helpful to review the differences between the two.

GOALS	OBJECTIVES
-shows general intent and direction	-shows specific intentions with measurable indices and time limits
-has a long time frame	-has shorter time frame
-need not be stated in measurable terms	-must be stated in measurable terms
-uses verbs like:	-uses action verbs that are behaviorally observable, like:
promote	write
enhance	draw
enable	construct
appreciate	name
respect	demonstrate
know	state
understand	add
comprehend	
-alludes to covert intentions not immediately visible	-specifies overt measurable/ observable behaviors

The most germane and useful 'action plan' is conceptualized with indices such as the following in mind: relevance, importance, sufficiency in scope, realism and feasibility, timeliness, and efficency in the requirements of time, cost, manpower and other resource allocations. The program that orchestrates a perceptible consistency between the needs of its target groups and the plan it develops to alleviate those needs and accomplish other related tasks is proceeding well toward making the total educative process a beneficial experience for all involved.

Activities and Events to Operationalize Defined Objectives. Learning experiences, program activities and events are used to accomplish the program's stated objectives. This characteristic

encompasses the program's day-to-day activities with children, parents, decision-makers and other target groups. Relative to the educational program, some guidelines that can govern the conceptualization and implementation of planned learning activities are as follows:
-the learning activities are organized and presented in an order of difficulty: the activities represent a task analysis of the pertinent objectives
-the learning activities are sufficient in quantity to teach to the objectives
-the learning activities are developmentally applicable relating to the childrens' chronological and mental ages
-the learning activities are experientially relevant touching the child's background and daily activities
-the learning activities are representative of all developmental skill areas: motor development, perceptual development, language development, social and emotional development, and involve various reasoning tasks
-the learning activities are motivational, challenging, recreational, and appealing
-the learning activities allow for various kinds of interactions: child-child, child-material, child-teacher
-the learning activities are multi-dimensional in sensory stimulation and instructional in-put
-the learning activities emphasize concrete and abstract experiences
-the learning activities are conducted with the roles of the teacher fluctuating from active to passive, facilitory to directive, depending upon the needs of the children and the requirements of the activities.

Coherence and clarity must be evident in this characteristic if the objectives are to be implemented. The activities for children, parents and others emanate from the objectives and provide the vehicle on which programs "take a target from where it is to where the program wants it to be".

Periodic Evaluation for Program Improvement.
A sound evaluation and rational program revision are keys to self-renewal, relevancy, and responsiveness and are inherent to program effectiveness (Kaufmann, 1972). To achieve effectiveness, programs must periodically evaluate each of its components. The data received from this evaluation are used in making decisions about needed programmatic changes, deletions, etc. The willingness to and practice of critically evaluating the program and making the data available to teachers, administrators and other pertinent persons is a major determiner of program success. Evaluation must be seen as an opportunity to improve rather than as an instrument of and for reproof.

A useful interpretation of the concept and composites of educational evaluation was offered by Stufflebeam et. al. (1971) and can be helpful in interpreting the demands and tasks of evaluation. Stufflebeam and associates defined educational evaluation as "the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision-alternatives. This

definition requires the implementation of a process-oriented evaluation plan designed to specify, collect, and provide practical and useful information on which to judge competing alternatives or decisions. Given that evaluation supplies information for decision-making, the decisions to be served must be known (Stufflebeam 1974). This is one way to assure that appropriate questions, issues, and concerns are identified for evaluative purposes, it is imperative that as the instructional program components are being developed the evaluation plan is also being formed. No component or plan is to be conceptualized and planned in isolation of the others. In program development and organization, the general categories of decisions evaluative data address are need identification and planning, structuring of procedures, selection and implementation, and feedback and re-considerations. It is imperative to program effectiveness that the program be able to determine at any point to what extent, if at all, objectives are being met. Warranted programmatic flexibility is to be supported by reliable and valid data. The general question asked is "What information do we need to improve the operation of our program?". An evaluation committee of Phi Delta Kappa in the book, Decision-Making and Educational Evaluation, identified a set of criteria against which most evaluation plans can be judged. The rather self-explanatory criteria are: validity, reliability, objectivity, relevance, importance, scope, trustworthiness -- credibility -- of the evaluator collecting, recording and reporting the evaluative data, timeliness, information dissemination procedures, and the prudential criterion of cost, manpower, and time restrictions.

Supportive Services: An Important Element of Effectiveness. The varied demands on teachers to address the assessed needs of children and to account for their effectiveness grossly illustrates their need for assistance from 'other personnel' who can provide qualitative services in the development and conduct of beneficial programs and activities. Support services are used best when they are organized to minimize managerial responsibilities of teachers; this would allow more time to concentrate on conceptualizing, planning, implementing, and orchestrating the learning experiences of children. In using supporting services and personnel the effective programs take care to become knowledgeable of the skills and abilities these persons, agencies, etc. have and how this diverse representation of skills, interests, and motivations can be harnessed for the mutual good of the program and the supportive personnel. Proper use of ancillary services improves the effectiveness of teachers and can enhance their impact. Every program can make better use of its staff manpower when (1) it engages siblings, parents and guardians (2) it makes definitive contact with the sometimes forgotten segments of the community, such as the elderly, the retired (3) it takes the initiative to be knowledgeable of those social, economic, and political factors that could influence the pro - vision of services to its target groups (4) it identifies and contacts available and accessible resources within the community,

state, region, and nation and (5) it incorporates public and private resources to assist in the development of a multi-prong approach to stimulate program and child growth and development.

One very imperative guideline for use of supportive personnel: Be sure to have a defined set of responsibilities that truly enhance program quality and can be personally rewarding to the participants.

Parents as Participants, Partners and Controllers.

The particular role parents have played in early education programs has varied from participants, to partners, to controllers. Various programs have enjoyed the input of parents in at least one or a combination of these role relationships. The following diagram shows examples of each category:

Participants	Paraprofessionals Teachers Volunteers Resource Personnel Discussion group leaders Maintenance and care personnel
Partners	Program area directors Supervisors Teachers Special events coordinators Fund-raisers Community liason
Controllers	Administration Board Members Co-op members Planners-Evaluators

Participants provide an auxillary task-force type service as a 'peripheral addition' to the administrative, instructional, or clerical program staffs. Partners are those participating on a more regular and regulated basis who may have directive responsibilities. Controllers serve in a policy-setting, decision-making capacity, and have responsibility for the organization, administration, and evaluation of the school and its programs.

There must be qualitative involvement by parents; this involvement can assume a variety of forms and may fluctuate from time to time.

When conceptualizing and planning programs and activities, the program should be cognizant of at least five program dimensions:

- -providing social and emotional support to and outlets for parents;
- -providing opportunities for information exchange between and among parents, teachers and other professionals;
- -providing avenues for parent participation in program activities;

-improving the quality of interactions between parents and their children; and
-developing and improving marketable skills of parents.
These dimensions consume a large percentage of any program's theoretical concerns about programming for parents.

Maintaining Continual Contact with Children.
Continued contact refers to the extent of the program's period for impact on the child. The year-long programs have a better chance for immediate impact and laying a foundation for later academic achievement than does the eight or twelve-week summer program. With the great variety and number of environmental factors, i.e., social, economic, that can impede the learning and progress of children, it is important that there be quality and length to the intervention.

Available data (Weikart, 1971) indicates that sustained intervention through the first four grades or longer may be necessary to stimulate and hold gains made in early childhood. The effective programs develop good identifiable working relationships with agencies and schools that possibly could be their children's next educational matriculation point. This relationship can provide the framework for the maintenance of contact with children once they have left -- graduated -- the preschool program. The contact need not be the same instructional intervention of the early education program, but a communication that would allow the 'receiving agency' to benefit from the preschool's knowledge and data base on the child. The receiving agency can benefit from such activities as the following:

-conferring with the early education staff about the children and the activities of the program
-communicating with the children's parents to maintain the home-school relationship
-reviewing applicable cumulative records, etc.

A Belief in the Child's Ability to Learn and the School's or Program's Responsibility to Address his Needs.
This characteristic is related to the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. If the program has little regard for the child's potential as a learner and to develop and progress, then this attitude will manifest itself in the program's structure and activities. This characteristic may very well be the most important, or at least a cornerstone, to child success and program effectiveness. As important as it is, its presence is almost equally difficult to validly and reliably measure beyond the possibility of ambiguity or misinterpretation. This 'difficult to measure' quality, however, must not deter the program planner from valiantly attempting to insure the existence of this characteristic in the early education program. If this characteristic were absent (or inoperative) from the program's theoretical orientation, its objectives, or its general procedures, a number of factors would be negatively influenced. Such items as the following are programmatic indices that can be indicative of this characteristic's existence in an early education program. A program can be judged as having this characteristic according to its responses to these

issues:

- -the quality of teacher planning and organization of the learning/instructional activities
- -the qualifications and expertise level of the instructional staff
- -the frequency and character of the pre-and in-service training provided the program's staff
- -the manner in which the program's target groups are presented in its literature, its interaction with other programs, and its new staff
- -the manner in which program decisions are made about the child
- -the program's interpretation of assessment and evaluative data, its subsequent planning, decision-making, and recommendations
- -the unwillingness to serve as a visible child advocate
- -the program's use of valid research findings in its organization and activities
- -the program's unqualified acceptance and support of whatever deficit theory seems to be in vogue
- -the program's attempts to make the instructional activities an effectively engaging experience
- -the program's attempts to assist children and their families in addressing bureaucratic excuses for inaction

These factors should be taken into consideration in the conceptualization and planning activities of early education programs.

Reliable and Valid Documentation of Program Operations.

An essential element of success in any field or endeavor is the ability to recognize unproductive and unfavoring behaviors, practices, etc., and initiate necessary actions to eliminate or negate their impact or influence. The effective early childhood education program maintains reliable and valid documentation of its administrative and program operations such that sound and beneficial activities and practices can be reemphasized, modified if necessary, and replicated, while inefficient and uncomplementary characteristics are eliminated.

Documentation is an inherent task of accountability. The accountable program bases its actions on reliable and sufficient data -- documentation. The best decision-making is done after considering as much pertinent data as practical. Reliable and valid documentation is an irreplaceable component of effective programming in early childhood education.

As the program contemplates its documentation of program operations, the following questions would have to be asked of and answered by the program:

What is documentation of program operations?
Why should I document program operations?
What specifically should I document?
How should I document programmatic activities?
When should documentation take place?
Where should the documented data be maintained?
What about the issues of child and/or family confidentiality and program documentation?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gallagher, J.J., Surles, R. and Hayes, A. Program Planning and Evaluation. Technical Assistance Development System, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, UNC. Vol. 2 First Chance for Children.

Kaufman, R.A. Educational System Planning. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

Stufflebeam, D. "The Use and Abuse of Evaluation in Title III." Theory into Practice 6 (June 1967): 126-133.

Stufflebeam, D. and others. Educational Evaluation and Decision-Making. Itasca, Ill.: Peacock Publ., Inc. 1971.

Weikart, D.P. and others. The Cognitively Oriented CUrriculum: A Framework for Preschool Teachers. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1971.